

Topudurti Lauded at Army Secretary Ceremony

By Dana Finney

Dr. Kirankumar Topudurti, deputy director for the Champaign, Ill.-based Construction Engineering Research Laboratory (CERL), was awarded the Department of the Army Decoration for Exceptional Civilian Service. He accepted the honor from Secretary of the Army John McHugh in April at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.



Secretary of the Army John McHugh, left, presents the Decoration for Exceptional Civilian Service to CERL Deputy Director Dr. Kirankumar Topudurti during a ceremony at the Pentagon.

The commendation recognizes Topudurti's extraordinary contributions to the Engineer Research and Development Center, CERL's parent organization. His leadership and innovative ideas energized the development and execution of the environmental quality and installations mission area, with a focus on military installations and sustainable lands and ranges.

As an internationally recognized environmental engineer, Topudurti is committed to building a strong, diverse professional workforce in the Corps' research and development community. Under his leadership as deputy, CERL has added several state-of-the-science laboratories to facilitate critical research for the Army.

Growing up in India, Topudurti's studies focused on science and math as background for pursuing a career in engineering. The oldest of four children, "My goal was to get my undergraduate degree in civil engineering and quickly find a practicing engineer job to help my parents," he said.

But after graduating with his bachelor's degree, his life took a different direction. "Right after college, when I was on a short teaching assignment, I met a professor who encouraged me to get my master's and Ph.D.," he said. "He

also suggested that I seek my Ph.D. abroad because he said it would help me grow into something I never imagined to be possible. That 10-minute conversation changed my life."

Having briefly experienced the joy of teaching and, as a result of the professor's advice, Topudurti wanted to get his Ph.D in the United States and return to India to teach in an engineering college.

Topudurti completed a master's degree in civil engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology at Kanpur, then in 1984 headed to the United States on a full scholarship from the Illinois Institute of Technology at Chicago.

At the time he arrived in the States, the environmental engineering field – especially hazardous waste engineering and management – was seeing explosive growth.

"Pursuing this area became my passion. Besides it being a highly interdisciplinary field, which was appealing, I knew I would take great personal satisfaction in taking care of the environment," he said.

Still envisioning a career as a teacher, Topudurti nonetheless accepted a position at Tetra Tech EM Inc. as an environmental engineer and quickly rose to become the principal technical advisor. He believed that having practical experience in the field first would help make him a better teacher.

At Tetra Tech, he became fully engaged in research and development, leading teams that greatly advanced the science behind many innovative technologies including the electron-

beam (E-beam) technology, which uses a stream of high-energy electrons to destroy toxic organic wastes in polluted groundwater. His other significant area of research on field measurement technologies aided rapid, cost-effective cleanup of petroleum hydrocarbon contamination. He did all of this work as a consultant to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA).

For awhile at Tetra Tech, Topudurti was able to realize his life's ambition to become a teacher by serving as an adjunct professor of environmental engineering at IIT. "It was a great experience, but because my other work for U.S. EPA and

industry, and with the Corps of Engineers has been so interesting, I haven't had time to think about a different career path," he said, adding, "Maybe later."

The recognition of Topudurti's professional excellence by the Secretary of the Army adds to a long list of awards he has received during his career. In the past year alone, he was named Federal Engineer of the Year by the National Society of Professional Engineers and a Fellow of the American Society of Civil Engineers; he also received the Telugu Association of North America Award in Science and the de Fleury bronze medal from the Corps of Engineers.